The Brazilian Remake of the Orpheus Legend: Film Theory and the Aesthetic Dimension

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Films and other forms of visual experience have become central issues for investigation in contemporary societies. From Simmel's emphasis on the precedence of visual experience in modern life to more recent explorations of new media of communication and entertainment, figural forms have been increasingly investigated. In addition, former concerns about hegemonic productions of the cultural industry or manipulative forms of popular leisure have been replaced by investigations that consider the products of the cultural industry in general as signifying practices. This article takes these recent contributions as its point of departure and investigates two Brazilian films that are based on the Greek Orpheus legend.

The films are adaptations of the play Orfeu da Conceição, written by the Brazilian poet and songwriter Vinícius de Moraes in 1956. The play reconfigures one of the most cherished myths of Western civilization about the very essence of musicality: the Greek legend of Orpheus. Moraes intertwined in his play Orpheus' eternal musical powers, the tragic story of love and passion between Orpheus and Eurydice, and the carnival festivities of the city of Rio de Janeiro. The story is set in a shantytown and on the streets of Rio, which are shown to be inhabited by a mostly black population.

Films are marked by elements of the historical periods in which they were created. The two remakes of the play belong to two different historical contexts. In fact, this was the central issue of my earlier investigation of these two films (Santos, 2001). Black Orpheus was made in 1959, when carnival festivities were strongly supported by politicians and were part of a populist construction of national identity. This film presented to a national
and international audience the images that have been associated with the Brazilian national identity ever since: carnival and samba. Since the first production, much has changed in Rio’s urban life. Along with industrial development and new technologies, the drug trade and new forms of violence have emerged. Carnival has become a central investment for the media, the tourist industry, local illegal organizations and, more recently, drug traffickers (Santos, 1998, 1999).

In Orfeu, the more recent production, the romantic atmosphere is replaced by a realistic perspective that aims to expose the links between carnival festivities and the cultural industry. Moreover, the film is the product of a society in which the issues of ethnic minorities and multiculturalism have become part of the discourses of everyday life. The differing portrayal of the city also points to a different construction of the nation. Eurydice in this new version is a descendent of the native population of the Northern region of Brazil, and clearly stands for one of the most forgotten and under-represented Brazilian minorities. In what concerns race relations, while the first production expressed the notion of racial democracy, which was widely accepted in the late 1950s, the second shows images of confrontation between blacks and whites. Racially conscious radical rap lyrics replace the bossa nova that predominated in the earlier film. The musical group Olodum, with its strong beat, provides the sound that enables young black people to affirm their racial identities.

In the first two sections of this article, the focus will be on the struggles for power within representation. Both films partly reflect the times in which they were produced, with a straightforward relation between the images they provide and social, political and economic aspects of the world they represent. Besides, the two films display different perspectives of Rio’s carnival practices, which are the result of the particular view of each production. The first cinematic version of the play was a French production with a French director, Marcel Camus. Poverty and social conflicts are enveloped in a romantic aura created by the narrative. A natural and wild landscape, sensual black people and the orgiastic side of the carnival festivities are the features exploited by the film. Despite the huge success it achieved abroad, Black Orpheus has been criticized by Brazilians, by such renowned directors as Jean-Luc Godard and by film critics, for creating exotic and festive images of the black and poor population of Brazilian shantytowns. Undoubtedly, features of the carnival festivities permeate the whole structure of social relationships in the film, which seems exaggerated and inappropriate to Brazilians.

In contrast, Orfeu was produced with the deliberate intention of providing a more faithful depiction of life in Brazilian shantytowns. Cacá Diegues, a Brazilian director, is responsible for this second cinematic version of the play, which was made in 1998. Despite all the best intentions of its director and his collaborators, which have been largely acknowledged, the film also deals with crude stereotypes of Brazilian life. As conflicts involving gender, race and the rights of minorities in general enter the
contemporary political agenda, the production of a truthful story about everyday life addressed to a larger audience becomes a hard task to accomplish. The elements of Rio's life are much more diverse, ambivalent and boundless than what is shown in the two films. Therefore, Orfeu also contains a certain level of arbitrariness.

The two films in question represent two different narrative styles, and both have to deal with the gap between representation and reality. The question that remains is why, even among Brazilians, who are aware of all the stereotypes the film contains, Black Orpheus is considered far superior to the recent remake. Probably, indeed, the first version will remain meaningful for a much longer period of time. This article takes up the wider question of how films have been judged, what the relation between producers and receptors entails and the aesthetic dimension inherent in film production. Considerations on the structures of power, on the one hand, and on the incompleteness within representation, on the other, do not fully address the issue of whether films can overcome the gap between fantasy and reality. The following sections will probe and expand the argument that Black Orpheus is judged the better film because it says more about Rio's society.

Films are as complex as the reality they propose to show to the public. As signifying practices, films are multifaceted and hold ambivalent meanings. There is a practical comprehension of what each film says that goes far beyond the first act of understanding. This is a result of the techniques employed, of the narrative style, but also of the system of unconscious signifying practices within the films. Films have some specificity as a medium. Like photography, they reproduce objects in a way that precludes a single relation between the camera and its visual effects, allowing many possibilities of experience and interpretation for the viewer. The images have the power of deluding the audience about what they see, even if the audience can choose which film to see on the basis of a choice between entertainment, documentary or work of art. The spectator is drawn into each screen according to specific technologies inherent to the film narrative. The integration between music and images, on the one hand, and the artful intertwining of the themes of art, passion and carnival, on the other, encompass the sensitive and rational power within the narrative.

The Brazilian Nation as Voodoo for Tourists

In this section I will consider the current criticism of the exotic and colourful images of Brazil created and spread around the world by Black Orpheus, the film directed by a Frenchman, Marcel Camus. This film has been correctly considered as the one that has had the most influence on the construction of Brazil's image abroad (Perrone, 2000: 46). Several well-known foreign visitors have mentioned the film as being crucial for their first positive embrace of the country. Besides, it became an internationally acclaimed and awarded film. In 1959, it won the Oscar for the Best Foreign Film in the United States, and the Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival.
It was chosen as the Best Foreign Film and the Best Film, respectively, by the New York Film Critics’ Circle and by the British Academy, and received the Golden Globe Award in 1960. It must be added that the soundtrack was composed by Luiz Bonfá and Antonio Carlos Jobim. These musicians, along with the poet Vinicius de Moraes, were responsible for the creation of the Brazilian musical style known as bossa nova.

In 1998, the Brazilian film-maker Cacá Diegues made the second film, also on the basis of Moraes’ play. Diegues is a Brazilian director, who is internationally acclaimed for films such as Bye Bye Brasil, Xica da Silva and Tieta. He still follows some of the main lines established by an important movement of Brazilian film-makers of the 1960s in which he took part. The movement was known as cinema novo, and their members tried to use commercial film-making, often linked to political interests, to create critical and artistic productions.

As Orfeu was not favourably reviewed by film critics abroad, the Brazilian singer-songwriter Caetano Veloso, who wrote Orfeu’s soundtrack and is also the husband of one of the producers of the film, wrote a challenging article to the New York Times defending the film and criticizing the earlier, internationally awarded version. According to Veloso, Black Orpheus depicted Brazilians as exotic people using outrageously fanciful colours and presented the general ‘voodoo for tourists’ ambience (Veloso, 2000).

The issue of power in representations of nations is not a new question, and it has been a major issue in the postcolonial debate. Veloso has accurately called attention to the fact that, in contrast with the huge fascination that Camus’ Black Orpheus exerted over foreign audiences, the film was not received with enthusiasm in Brazil. In his book about the musical movement called Tropicália, of which he was one of the main leaders, Veloso had already left an important testimony about his negative impression of the film:

I saw the film in the Cine Tupi (!), in the Baixa dos Sapateiros, in Bahia. Like everyone else in the audience, I laughed and felt ashamed of the brazen inauthenticities that that French film-maker allowed himself in order to create a fascinatingly exotic product. (Veloso, 1997: 252)

In fact, for most Brazilians, Black Orpheus appears as one more of those things made para inglês ver, that is, produced according to a foreign idealization of Brazilian habits and costumes. Cacá Diegues himself declared to the press that he too had been very disappointed with Camus’ film. When he first saw it he was just starting his career as a film director, but nonetheless he was profoundly upset by the exotic images of Brazilian life. Furthermore, it is widely known among Brazilians that the playwright Vinicius de Moraes was also deeply disappointed with Camus’ film.

Veloso’s perception of the constraints that are created by the tropical and exotic images of Brazil is not a recent one. Although he is currently one of the most important Brazilian musicians, and as such a member of the
international musical circuit, it is possible to say that since the beginning of his career he has refused to limit his work to what could be considered 'Brazilian music'. In the late 1960s, the left-wing music movements during the military regime rejected the international rock movement in the search for the 'authentic' in national culture. In contrast, the musical movement called Tropicália became known for its freedom to incorporate and engage in a dialogue with different rhythms and musical styles. Eclectic and hybridized experiments were used, and the leaders of the movement, Caetano Veloso and Gilberto Gil, merged national and transnational contributions in the construction of their own style. It is interesting to note, therefore, that in the 1960s Veloso was already well aware of and opposed to the constraints imposed by some stereotypical and essentialistic versions of what a construction of the Brazilian nation ought to be like.

It is not surprising, therefore, to find in Veloso's article a sharp criticism of exotic images of Brazil. What's more, the musician decried the highly positive reception of the film by international critics, who were uncritical of the stereotyped version of the Brazilian nation portrayed in it. Although it was denounced by many Brazilian writers, songwriters, musicians and the public in general, Black Orpheus was indeed recognized as an outstanding production by the international film academies. Veloso's observations question the ability of international forums to reward the best films. Undoubtedly the musician has a point. The Brazil with a z was certainly different from the Brasil that Brazilians were used to writing with an s. The construction of a sensual and festive Brazil certainly establishes an imagery that is responsible for the exclusion of a large number of Brazilians from international artistic and academic forums. To this day, Brazilian artists complain that the images of sensuality, eroticism and tropicalism have imposed enormous restrictions upon their works. Their production has not only been framed by these images, but is also judged according to the patterns of what is considered to be a Brazilian artistic form. When escaping these patterns, Brazilian painters, musicians or film-makers have to deal with prejudice about their ability to express 'universal' values.

Veloso holds a special place in the musical world, with extensive international experience, which allows him to denounce these constraints as an insider. The choice of the Afro-Brazilian musical group Olodum for the soundtrack of Orfeu, for instance, represents the decision to move back and forth between national and foreign influences. The group forged samba-reggae, later incorporating electronic pop data, and thus came to represent the international style of the transatlantic black diaspora (Perrone, 2000: 64). The recent outcry over the marginalization of women artists in art history has already made clear the point that those who decide what is good and bad in the art world share specific canons and that their decisions exert a certain power. Thus, in political terms, the recent Orfeu represents the deliberate intention of a Brazilian director to retell the Greek legend about the eternity of art through a more faithful account of the favela culture of a Brazilian city. However, there is more to be considered. In what follows,
I will question Veloso’s assertion that Orfeu is faithful to the Brazilian reality.

**Brazilian Social Types: Blacks, Witches, Prostitutes and Rogues**

Veloso defended the film *Orfeu* for its more faithful depiction of the social and cultural life in Rio’s slums. The director Cacá Diegues wrote the screenplay with the support of a group of important Brazilian intellectuals. One of them, Paulo Lins, has done extensive research on violence in Rio’s shantytowns and published a book, which was praised as a new literary genre for intertwining scientific and fictional elements (Lins, 1997). Hermano Vianna, an anthropologist, has written a perceptive study of the relations between funk music and poor young people, countering claims that this musical style is characterized by manipulation and inauthenticity (Vianna, 1988). João Emanuel Carneiro contributed with his experience as screenwriter. Producers, directors, actors and screenwriters, therefore, sought to escape from a romantic and nationalistic version of the play and to be politically correct. Yet the film that resulted is not very convincing about the story it tells.

On the issue of racial conflicts *Orfeu* is far from doing justice to the complexity of the problem of discrimination in Brazil. Both films directly face issues of race. *Black Orpheus* had an all-black cast, which brought about a silent revolution in the complex racial relations of Brazil. Yet the film shows neither racial conflicts nor racial discrimination. The gifted Orpheus is black, as are all the other characters. Using only black actors and actresses, the film creates a universe in which the problem of racial difference is eliminated from the outset. If *Black Orpheus* eliminates images of racial confrontation, *Orfeu* equally simplifies the problem as it reproduces the North American dual model of race. Although it is not my objective to enter the debate about racial discrimination in Brazil, it must be pointed out that the black-and-white model of identifying race is far from being recognized by the majority of the Brazilian population, which defines itself according to more than 300 terms related to race and colour.

To deal with religious subjects is not an easy task either. In *Black Orpheus* the hero goes to an African-Brazilian ritual in order to rescue his lover from Hell. African-Brazilian possession rituals, however, such as the one shown in the film, summon deities, not dead people. *Orfeu* attempts a more realistic depiction of Brazilian religions. While Orpheus’ mother is a leader of an Afro-Brazilian cult, his father is a Protestant. It so happens that religious conflicts between Afro-Brazilian sects and new Protestant cults are one of the major tensions in the poor neighbourhoods of Rio. In addition, the mother is portrayed as a hysteric while the Protestant father is seen as a controlled and supportive person. The contrast made in the film between the two rituals is nothing but an exaggerated version of the contrast between uncivilized and civilized ways of praying. The film reproduces an untruthful generalization of trance situations, usually associated with collective rituals of possession. It takes into account neither that the mães-de-santo -
leaders of the Afro-Brazilian religious rituals – hold immense prestige in Brazil for their strong personalities, nor that there is a criss-crossing between Afro-Brazilian cults of possession and new Protestant rituals.

In terms of sexuality, Black Orpheus has been blamed for the constructions of Afro-Brazilian women in contexts of nakedness, sex and hyper-eroticism. Yet Orfeu presents a weak alternative in terms of the construction of female identity. In the opening scenes of Orfeu, we see torrid sex scenes between Orpheus and his girlfriend, Mira, who is portrayed as a loose woman. In contrast, we see the association between true love and chastity, which configures Eurydice’s role. However important the association between the sex-tourism industry and Rio’s carnival may be, this is an aspect that cannot be generalized, since the festivity comprises a variety of situations and political implications. Features such as transvestism, eroticism, sexual encounters in public spaces, homosexual relations and bodily contacts between strangers, to list just a few of the practices seen as transgressive that can be easily noticed during carnival, are barely evoked in the film.

Moreover, the representation of lust in the persona of a porta-bandeira (standard-bearer) was a very unhappy choice. Mira is portrayed as a seductive standard-bearer. Samba schools are carnival associations, organized in the poor neighbourhoods of the city since the 1930s. Although many transformations have occurred since then, the main organizers of these associations try to stick to some long-standing traditions. The standard-bearer and her partner, the master of ceremonies, have the major task of displaying to the public the manners of the old nobility. The organizers of the parades usually choose women belonging to the oldest and most traditional families associated with the schools, and it is not desirable that these women pose nude for Playboy magazine or display a blatant sexuality in public life. Certainly there are lots of models who sell their bodies in carnival, but they either parade ahead of the percussion sections or exhibit their bodies on the top of the huge carnival floats.

Another problem concerns the issue of violence. Orfeu intended to show that brutal police forces and gangs associated with drug trafficking are major features of Rio’s shantytowns. Violence is present in senseless and cold-blooded murders, in scenes of shooting and execution, and in the decomposing corpses strewn around the bottom of the hill. Yet this framework is established in the blunt opposition between the good and the evil. Orpheus stands as the good musician, who appears as a foil for a former childhood friend of his, Lucinho, who has become a drug lord. The struggle against evil is embodied in the battle against the violence that menaces the neighbourhood. In Black Orpheus, evil is represented in a more symbolic way: it is a man in costume, who comes from the past and kills Eurydice.

The Brazilian director Cacá Diegues was concerned about the inauthenticity of the earlier film, and he intended to show the favela culture in its true colours. Veloso’s defence of Orfeu is related to the same issue. The drama should have verisimilitude in its depiction of everyday life. Yet,
although Black Orpheus emphasizes the Greek tale and Orfeu the social reality of a Rio shantytown, neither is intended as a fantasy or a documentary. Thus, despite the intentions of the professionals involved with the film, Orfeu also gives only a partial perspective of Rio's shantytown. The creation of stereotypes about Brazilian society is not solely the domain of foreigners. The construction of national identities involves a negotiation not only between nations, but also within nations, and many struggles and relations of power are not shown in Orfeu.

Orfeu is one of a set of films that has benefited from the Brazilian Ministry of Culture’s new cultural policy for the improvement of the cinematic industry. As a matter of fact, the film was chosen as the best Brazilian film in 1998, in a context also sponsored by the Ministry of Culture, receiving the Glauber Rocha Award. Yet it must be emphasized that if Black Orpheus did not make a strong impression on the Brazilian audience, neither did Orfeu. In addition, it must be observed that when we talk about Orfeu’s audience we refer to a narrow segment of educated people, representing less than 10 percent of the population. In fact, neither of the two films can be considered as very popular. The majority of the Brazilian population has neither access to nor interest in cultural events such as films, theatres and musical concerts, which are expensive for them and distant from their lives.

But, then, even if we consider the narrow Brazilian middle class, it is important to understand why there is a widespread opinion, even among viewers who subscribe to Diegues’ criticism of the earlier version of Vinícius de Moraes’ play, that Black Orpheus is better than Orfeu. Diegues’ film was positively reviewed neither by foreign nor by Brazilian film critics. Certainly the criticism of Orfeu brings us to another issue – the grounds on which a film should be judged, since it was appraised principally neither on the grounds of its ability to document reality nor for its political perspective.

**Concepts and Potentialities of the Seventh Art**

In the field of social theory, most studies focus on the social construction of artists and works of art. What counts is the relation between a cultural product and the collective nature, social processes and/or symbolic meanings (Becker, 1982; Wolff, 1981). Bourdieu has produced a paradigmatic study in this area showing, first, that people judge artistic productions according to specific cultural codes that are disputed socially; second, that there is interdependence between the achievement of cultural capital and social hierarchies (Bourdieu, 1984). The point is that these analyses do not take into consideration the aesthetics of film productions. The fact that films, like all signifying practices, are as complex as the reality they propose to show to the public, must be investigated. It is, therefore, important to analyse what lies in the core of film production.

Žižek’s considerations about the two cinematic versions of the play The Children's Hour seem pertinent to the parallel evaluation of the two versions of Orfeu da Conceição. According to him, although a distortion was corrected in the second version, the first is, as a rule, considered far superior
to its 1961 remake (Žižek, 2000: 248). To him, filmic representations are capable of producing fantasy as the result both of a subjective intention and of the lack of it (Žižek, 2000: 227). There are films that are regarded as classics and that last for decades, whereas others are completely forgotten at the end of the season, even when they are big money-makers at the time they are released.

Adorno and Horkheimer (1979) raised some issues that are still paradigmatic for studies of film production. As is well known, these authors maintained that the culture industry effected total control of the instinctual nature of human beings. Yet they conceived of aesthetic experience as a possibility of knowledge. To Adorno, the centre of the autonomous work of art, the work that has already differentiated itself from the symbols of theology and from the taboo of magic, is inherently dialectical because it juxtaposes the magical and the mark of freedom (1977: 121). The state of freedom is the state of something that can be consciously produced and made (1977: 122).

According to the thesis of the dialectical character of the work of art, great literature, music and painting may bridge the gap between experience and representation by showing an imaginary world that transcends fixed meanings. A work of art, if it is to be considered as such, must allow us to recognize ourselves in the new experience that is created. Its potential is related to the uniqueness of interpretation rather to the mere attempt to reproduce events that have been experienced. The artist should have the ability to express otherness through the work of art. The desire of those who contemplate and the work contemplated must merge in a new constellation.

It should be clear from what has been said that, in order to explain the act of contemplation of a work of art, it is necessary to accept that one must grasp the artist's way of seeing the world through his or her work of art. The aesthetic dimension of a work of art cannot be the result of the identity between itself and the object that was represented, since instead of being a copy it becomes the object of a new aesthetic experience. The question of mediation is central for these arguments and represented the key issue in Adorno's critique of Walter Benjamin's theory of distraction and shock-like experience. To Adorno, even the German expressionist cinema did not allow interpretation. In his analyses of Chaplin's films he finds only romanticism (1977: 124). The reason for Adorno's criticism lies in his analysis of the character of film experience, which is very similar to the one defended by Benjamin. In contrast to the great works of art, which are related to a differentiated and autonomous social sphere, films are not unique, since they are produced in series for different audiences, they have no clear authorship, and their images are the result of mimetic reproductions of life. Photographic and filmic representation ruins the status of classical art in its core.

The German cultural critic Walter Benjamin was one of the first authors to consider the distinctiveness inherent to new media such as film and photography. Like the other members of the Frankfurt School, he
accepted that the experience resulting from autonomous works of art had faded in modernity. Unlike them, he had some positive expectations about the new techniques of reproduction (Benjamin, 1968: 217–52). Benjamin saw the early cinematic experience as a new aesthetic experience that clashed with traditional notions of art, in particular the cult of l’art pour l’art. To him, a great historical shift in the organization of human experience had taken place, and the new reproduction technology of photography and film was simultaneously the result and the agent of these transformations.

I would like to outline three main aspects of Benjamin’s theory. First, there is the understanding that the iconic relationship between film and referent shifted the organization of human perception. Filmic perception of nature is related to the mimesis of nature rather than to the interpretation of it. Second, there is the awareness that, despite the illusion of continuity between image and referent, the perception of nature is discontinuous and the moment of exposure is arbitrary. Third, the author is optimistic about the new techniques of reproduction, including cinematic productions, because of the power of collective reception created by them. As his commentators have stressed, Benjamin had the merit of perceiving very early that the new reproduction media changed the focus to spectatorial involvement (Hansen, 1987: 179–224).

The power of creating magic and illusion enabled the new media to connect with a large number of people, regardless of their cultural background. Moving images do not demand from the public a former experience, which is necessary in the case of the contemplation of a work of art. On the contrary, films are associated with a new form of experience that enters one’s consciousness despite one’s will. While the work of art was associated with the realm of production, the new reproduction technology exerted its power in the realm of reception. Besides, whereas the bourgeois cult of art requires individual contemplation, reproducibility is associated with collective perception.

There is common view that filmic experience is based on identification, that is, there is an emotional, animistic or mimetic relationship to the objects that are shown. Spectators have no alternative but to identify themselves with the images on the screen. Whereas Adorno saw in the issue of identification and of elimination of mediation the rise of alienation, Benjamin believed that the audience could be aware that mimesis was achieved through arbitrariness. The dialectic between continuity and discontinuity within filmic representation was associated with what he named the shock effect.

To Benjamin the permanence of an ‘aesthetic experience’ within filmic representation was possible through the formal exaggeration of technical features such as the process of montage. A rapid succession of images could be worked out. To him the magical and illusionist power of filmic representation, its kinetic and temporal manipulations as well as its exhibitionistic tendency, could exert a great impact upon the masses and at the same time
raise some consciousness of its arbitrariness. Film’s seductive power over a
great number of persons entailed that filmic representation could work as a
model for realizing and reconciling cinema’s aesthetic with a political poten-
tial.

What these debates do not show is that there are different ways and
possibilities within the filmic experience. There is a variety of possible
film/spectator relations. Adorno is certainly right when he asserts that the
main intent of the culture industry is to make spectators identify with the
characters on the screen and imaginatively live the sort of experiences they
don’t have in real life anymore. It is a way of releasing emotions, such as
fear and passion. As we know, the attempt to achieve a critical perception
of society through the illusionary power of the machine is not the main
objective of the mainstream productions of the cultural industry. The alien-
ated and alienating organization of Hollywood cinema, the benchmark of
the cultural industry, is usually dedicated to the creation of a portrayal of
reality based on the presentation of human beings by stereotyped definitions
of their characters and on temporal sequences that obey a linear ordering
of time (Hansen, 1987: 180).

When films intend to fulfil the audience’s desire to take images as
reality, what results is that a new form of entertainment is provided to an
audience that is mainly concerned with consuming emotions. The film
doesn’t last in one’s imagination; it is forgotten, along with the release of
emotions. The narrative strategies and techniques can be used to epitomize
or to hide the narrator and the techniques inherent to cinematic reproduc-
tion. This results in different forms of film/spectator relations. Given the
current populism of moving images, it is unsurprising to find that the power
of fantasy masks the arbitrariness and discontinuities produced by the
camera, which the early film-makers believed should be apparent.

Yet the features outlined by Benjamin were not completely absent from
mainstream productions. Brigard pointed out that Russian film-makers of the
1920s, like Eisenstein and Pudovkin, as well as members of the surrealist
movement like Buñuel, were interested in creating counter-strategies out of
the illusionistic power of cinematic techniques. Eisenstein along with other
Russian film-makers, worked on the new possibilities of using the camera in
what they called ‘cinema of attractions’ (Brigard, 1995: 23). They attempted
to consider the camera in ‘pure state’, that is, capable of revealing persons
and capturing meanings at any moment without any pretension. They
explored the mimetic features of the techniques of reproduction. The kinoki
or ‘cinema-look’ means that camera techniques prevail and that the subject
who looks at its object through the camera is ignored. When actors look at
the camera, it is as if they saw right through it and looked at the audience.
But the use of the camera as a prism doesn’t entail that the public will have
only fragments of reality or an incomprehensible world. To them, these frag-
ments, like life in itself, must be reworked to provide wholeness. Montage,
therefore, became a crucial feature for these film-makers. Filmic experience,
then, contains more than illusions and crude reproductions of life.
The films *Black Orpheus* and *Orfeu* make use of different techniques in order to relate to the audience. The French director Marcel Camus made abundant use of medium and long shots. This is a technique that is used to grant the spectator the freedom of letting his or her gaze roam independently. If it is fair to say that even extreme long shots predetermine the perspective of the audience, it is also plausible to say that in these cases the orchestration of the gaze is not done in the same way. What we see in *Black Orpheus* is a poetic story about the eternity of art and the tragedy of life, which is told smoothly through melodic sounds. The rhythm of the development of the events is very slow and the sequence of images matches the music perfectly. The entire narrative is permeated by music and the harmony between sound and image contributed to the worldwide recognition of *bossa nova* as the ultimate musical expression of the Brazilian nation.

The soundtrack has been considered one of the most important features of the film, which helps create the meaningful association between the play and the classical framework of the Greek legend. The sound transcends words (Perrone, 2000: 46–71). Practices of everyday life are represented as festive and musical expressions. What happens, therefore, is that *Black Orpheus* creates a world of fantasy out of reality. The musical moments and motifs in the film are not an inauthentic portrayal of urban life, but an exaggeration that allows the audience to be drawn into the fantasy, which, however, is not a mere fantasy.

The Brazilian director Cacá Diegues used techniques common in documentary films, such as short takes and close-ups. His main interest was to associate the Greek legend with a more realistic Brazilian context. In addition, he also used some artifices of production, casting actual celebrities of Rio's cultural life in bit parts. Nelson Sargento, an important musician of the older generation of Brazilian sambistas, and Caetano Veloso are briefly featured. What's more, to play the lead role the director chose Tony Garrido, who is not an actor but a well-known member of a famous Brazilian reggae band called Cidade Negra. Garrido is shown in the film parading in the Viradouro samba school, which coincidentally had the Greek legend of Orpheus as its main theme that year. Therefore the images of Orpheus shown in the film are similar to those shown to the whole nation by newspapers, magazines and Rede Globo, the powerful Brazilian television network.

Ethnographers concerned with cinematic technique have emphasized the links between their approaches and those developed by the Russian film-makers of the 1920s and members of the surrealist movement. There is also a close similarity between the techniques of ethnographic studies and of recent documentary films. To all these intellectuals it is clear, first, that cinematic technique makes manipulation possible and, second, that the images displayed on the screen are to a certain extent autonomous in relation to the film-makers’ intentions. Young summed up the idea of the iconic power of representation, which is associated both with the arbitrariness of reproduction and with the political potential of the camera, in the following sentence: ‘To put it at its bluntest – the camera tends to lie but the audience tends to believe’ (Young, 1995: 100).
The question of how viewers relate to the screen and what they can grasp through this experience has therefore been an issue of concern to literary critics, artists, anthropologists and film-makers. Even those who followed the rules of the cinéma vérité of the 1960s understood that films not only reproduce reality but also contain inconsistencies and flaws that can be attributed to the conflicts inherent to any narrative about reality. If there is an overall agreement about the notion of **kinoki** to be drawn from the film-makers of the 1920s, there is also the belief that it is necessary to employ exhaustively those features inherent to technology. It is not, therefore, a matter of believing that the camera can show the world as it is (Rouch, 1995: 83).

What is significant in these approaches is that techniques such as close-up, time lapse, slow motion and montage have the power to change our perception of the visual world. **Orfeu** attempts to break with continuity and the illusion of reality by introducing non-actors. This could have provided a subversive reading of the scenes. Yet it was done in such a timid way that the public simply perceived the non-actors as bad actors. The consequence was that, rather than deconstructing the illusionary power of representation, the merging of real-life celebrities and actors only strengthened the idea of a badly narrated story.

There is the camera's look directed at its object and the viewer's look directed at the screen. As we have seen, both **Black Orpheus** and **Orfeu** exploited these looks well as they attempted to break with the illusions of representation. Writers on film theory have not only examined the impact of visual images upon the public, on the basis of a phenomenological approach, but also moved beyond that so as to widen their field of analysis. Mulvey's investigation of three kinds of look within filmic representation offers a good way of expanding film theories. Besides the camera's look and the audience's look, Mulvey asserted the importance of the look exchanged by characters in the film (Mulvey, 1989).

In **Black Orpheus** a great number of scenes configure the Orphic legend through the presence of characters that anticipate the narrative. From the man in the pawnshop to the boys who admire the magic of Orpheus' songs, the characters tell the audience what they should expect from the story. Interesting studies of Hollywood films have shown that important elements of imbalance result from how looking is positioned in the film's story line. Denzin, for instance, observes that reflexive-voyeuristic films refuse the demands of narrative closure. To him, there have been Hollywood films that use the voyeur to allow the spectator to doubt what has been seen. Analysing a variety of financially successful Hollywood films from the 1940s to the present, the author argues that the working out with the voyeur allows the illumination of multiple meanings that can be brought to and extracted from the text (Denzin, 1995). Undeniably, to the Brazilian audience **Orfeu** shows 'the Other', a pale and stigmatized image of those persons who live in the shantytowns. It shows a reductionistic construction of prostitutes, witches, murderers, artists and rogues, who are not portrayed as human beings in their diversity and complexity. In contrast, we find in **Black
Orpheus the voyeur-look which shows that the film can criticize from within its own political ideology, refusing the demands of coherence within narrative. Did the film transcend the limits of narrative?

**The Transgressive Powers of Orpheus**

We have seen so far, first, that films bear the imprint of narrative conventions of historical periods; and, second, that however strong the intention to build an honest representation of reality may be, there is always an arbitrary relation between the images produced and the real world, on the one hand, and struggles for power that must be considered, on the other. Third, it was argued that, despite acknowledging that cinematic experience is about identification, several alternatives were considered in the attempt to free the look of the audience. Still, there is a last issue to be investigated.

I contend that the strength of *Black Orpheus* is due to the fact that it plays with the unsayable and opens the film to multiple interpretations, since these are also features of life and as such they are recognized by the public.

Even those who assert that *Black Orpheus* exemplifies an exotic and demeaning view of the Brazilian nation also acknowledge the power of the film, which has exerted a tremendous influence upon the public since its première. To Perrone, its force and enduring appeal derive largely from its presentations of the landscape and popular culture of Rio de Janeiro, especially music, that is, the percussion-dominated music and the new Brazilian musical genre that was being created, *bossa nova* (Perrone, 2000: 46–71). It has also been argued that the film established a strong association between the Brazilian nation, blackness and carnival (Stam, 1995).

Undoubtedly, despite all the 'voodoo for tourists' that is present in the film, *Black Orpheus* to this day has a powerful effect upon both foreign and national audiences. Even considering that the film is dated and that it reflects images of the nation in the 1950s, the observation is still valid. Without denying that music can be regarded as its central pillar (Perrone, 2000), or even that it provided the main framework of nation-building in the 1950s, I would like to develop the argument concerning the filmic capacity of transcending words. *Black Orpheus* still exerts a strong impact upon viewers because it provides a strong representation of sensual, erotic and pleasurable feelings. It allows the audience to project prohibited feelings onto the distant 'other', that is, to bring out erotic feelings, which in Brazil are associated with blacks and the poor.

It would be possible to assert that, in most Hollywood films, whereas male actors support active looks and undercut the possibility of an erotic look from the spectator to the screen, female actresses encourage precisely the opposite: the erotic look from the audience towards them. It was Mulvey who called attention to the difference between the active and passive way of looking and associated them respectively with the male and the female look. This example shows us that the question of visual representation must be understood along with the subtleties within visual representation.
(Mulvey, 1989). The important conclusion to be drawn from these observations is that, besides techniques and narrative styles, the story line must also be investigated according to explicit and implicit meanings.

Indeed, there is an important group of scholars who draw from Freud’s and Lacan’s psychoanalytic approaches as well as from Foucault’s theories of microphysics of power to explain cinematic productions as signifying practices (Hall, 1997). In the example given in the previous section, The Children’s Hour, Žižek argues that the more naïve version of the play, which seems to convey less data about social and cultural contexts, is better because it brings out features that point to unconscious elements. The first version is full of repressed eroticism, not the evident eroticism between the man and the woman, but that which occurs between the two women in the play: ‘that is to say, it is possible that the gaze which does not see what is actually going on clearly sees more, not less’ (Žižek, 2000: 248). As we examine the reconfiguration of the Orphic story with Brazilian shantytowns as background, it is also possible to say that Black Orpheus says more, not less, than Orfeu to a larger public. And what is at issue is also repressed eroticism.

**Art, Love and Carnival**

The play Orfeu da Conceição intertwined the deep essence of musicality, a passionate love story and carnival merrymaking. As we will see, all three elements of this narrative - music, passion and carnival - have been worked out as mythical elements full of transgressive power and capable of transcending social constraints. The quintessential power of the musical ethos is placed in the foreground by a poetic version of passionate love and carnival practices.

Whereas Black Orpheus attempts to explore the potential inherent to these transgressive elements, Orfeu emphasizes social constraints. Orfeu shows a hero who is a musician by profession. He uses his laptop to compose his music, and his success comes from this activity. The exceptional powers of music, which could even change the course of life and death as present in the legend, do not appear in the film. As a matter of fact, the hero is very much concerned about the dangerous life in the favela and expresses a desire to leave the shantytown and live with his lover in a safer world. Throughout the story the audience faces Orpheus’ moral dilemma: whether he should pursue his own private happiness or remain a role model for young people and stand up against the increasing power of drug traffickers. Happiness and virtue are not gifts, but are subordinated to the attainment of worldly goals.

In Black Orpheus music is not the hero’s profession, since he works as a streetcar conductor. Music is his gift, and he uses his magic powers to fight the tragic events that happen to him. Orpheus’ guitar creates a magic that changes the course of nature and lasts forever among human beings. Although it is part of everyday life, music rises above it. As Black Orpheus narrates the powers of music to enchant the audience, it mixes sound and
poetry in order to capture the audience's attention. In both films, in the
closing scenes a boy sings Orpheus’ songs in order to repeat his magic power
of making the sun rise. The seductive power of music, however, is present
only in the first story.

Besides music, passion also configures a feeling that is capable of transcen-
ding the rules of everyday life. Since the tragic outcome of Romeo and
Juliet we have been told that passion allows lovers to transgress whatever
rules they have to face. Whereas 
Black Orpheus
narrates a strong story of
love and passion in which lust and love are intertwined, Orfeu shows a
romantic relationship submitted to codes of morality and institutional
constraints. Even if the intention was to be faithful to the facts of a real-life
relationship, the film fails because the practices we see displayed in the
film are not very common among the Brazilian population, although still
idealized by sectors of bourgeois society. In this film, whereas the scenes of
sex between Orpheus and his girl friend Mira, the loose woman, are full of
sensuality, the lovemaking between the protagonist and his heroine takes
place under the sheets. Eurydice, on waking in the morning, ridiculously
requests Orpheus to put on his trousers in order to cover his nudity. Orfeu
contains many codes of a soap opera, in which the romantic encounter of
the couple entails the ideal of a bourgeois future life. It seems that in the
attempt to escape the highly sensual and erotic images of Black Orpheus,
the new version ended up as an implausible love story.

Another pivotal issue in both films is carnival. Regarding carnival
merrymaking, it was undoubtedly Mikhail Bakhtin's perceptive study that
illuminated the close links between sites of ribald discourse, obscene prac-
tices and women's and men's liberation from their innermost fears. Such
features of popular festivities as bodily excesses, laughter and pleasurable
feelings were described as practices capable of entailing an open and unde-
termined outcome as well as an egalitarian utopia in people’s lives. To
Bakhtin, the space of carnival was a dialogical one, a space where social
encounters occurred and provided the birth of new utopias. Bakhtin, there-
fore, based his approach on the opposition between official and popular
narratives and raised the carnivalesque to the aesthetic dimension
(Hirschkop, 1989; Todorov, 1984).

Yet Bakhtin himself wrote that carnival festivities took place in
medieval and Renaissance contexts, but that in our day they lacked the
essentials, that is, the all-human character, the festivity, utopian meaning
and philosophical depth (Bakhtin, 1968: 16). To many social theorists, it is
unthinkable that the transgressive potential of carnival could be realized
within private spaces and official public norms, where social forces are
completely domesticated (Stallybrass and White, 1993). Over the last three
decades, we find a growing number of investigations of the links between
carnival, popular culture and cultural industry. They have stressed the
embeddedness of the contemporary carnival feast in the bourgeois society,
which has managed to turn carnival festivities into rational and acceptable
narratives. The tourist industry is blamed for having completely emptied the possibilities of idleness and bodily practices.

Studies of Brazilian carnival have analysed the associations between carnival manifestations and social practices (Castro, 1994; Goldwasser, 1989; Leopoldi, 1978; Santos, 1998). These studies have denounced racial exploitation (Rodrigues, 1984), political clientelism (Augras, 1993; Chinelli and da Silva, 1993), the bureaucratization and commodification of the parades, as well as reiteration of Brazilian social hierarchy within its rituals (Queiroz, 1992). Orfeu also represents carnival as a manipulated activity, part of a cultural and tourist industry. While the main character goes to carnival parades, which is how he makes a living, Eurydice remains at home and watches her lover on television.

Summing up, while Camus explored the image of the sensual, exotic and erotic black people in an Edenic natural landscape, Orfeu sought to present a more realistic picture of poverty and corruption to replace the stereotypic and exotic images of tropical paradise. Yet the liberating powers of music, love and carnival are not merely fantasies. Victor Turner's assumption about the anti-structural properties of liminality in rituals and festivities (Turner, 1967) has been developed in some Brazilian investigations, of which Roberto DaMatta's famous book about carnival, rogues and heroes is the best example (1973, 1980, 1981a, 1981b). The anthropologist has been challenged about the optimistic, almost naïve, version he offers of these festivities (Stam, 1988), but if it is not possible to equate carnival practices and freedom, it is equally wrong to preclude any such potential in the festivities. It is not false to point out that features of the carnival, in a way very close to that described by Bakhtin, are not completely absent from contemporary social practices (Wills, 1989). Black Orpheus is not merely illusionary as it shows the lingering power of carnivalesque elements upon individuals and collectivities.

According to Bakhtin, the bodies in the grotesque realism of carnival comprise all the contradictions and imperfections eliminated by reason. The grotesque body replaces normality and creates a new language, a new social praxis in which new hierarchies are formed. When carnival becomes the site in which aberration exposes the norm, social hierarchies and ordered societies are established as a space of conflict. Carnival practices are seen as bringing out unexpected feelings, desires and actions that have the power to transcend the world of ordered rules and truths (Bakhtin, 1968: 75; Stallybrass and White, 1986).

I would like to argue that, to a European audience, and even to part of the Brazilian public the black and poor population does not need a mask to be considered the other, the grotesque, the different. As the people in the audience do not identify with the protagonists in the screen, they lose the reflective awareness of the abiding and constructive features of their sub-jectivities. They allow themselves to be drawn into the screen without constraints and to release their erotic unconscious feelings. The
relationship between the audience and the screen is not always the result of a conscious choice. Since we see the relationship between screen and audience as a mimetic one, we believe that films have the power to raise issues in such a subtle way that the contingencies of life go unnoticed. Black Orpheus, therefore, successfully brings out unconscious erotic feelings as it overlaps the imagery of the Brazilian nation with the Orphic theme. The message within the film is grasped not only through the information about forms of social life, but mainly through sensory experience, and it is by its mimetic faculty that it succeeds in overcoming geographic and social distances more easily.

The audience will not necessarily be able to say the real reason why they are moved. The result is that it is unnecessary to bring out the weight of this burden to the Brazilian black population, especially women, who endure the condition of reflecting the other's repressed desires. Fanon's analysis of the fundamental process of self-alienation in black people, which involves the desire for acceptance and assimilation, and generates feelings of inadequacy, objectification and trauma, says a lot about stereotyping and reification (Fanon, 1986). We might say that there is a perverseness in Black Orpheus, since the erotic attributes associated with the Brazilian black population are far from being alien to foreign identities. The feeling of shame will be replaced by pride the day we find in Brazilian black people's look the transposition from object to subject: we wonder when the active look will be present in the screen. Black people make up half of the Brazilian population, and a large majority of the population is the result of the miscegenation between blacks and whites. In brief, the first production is widely considered better than the second because it says more about Rio's life by means of its visual, auditive and non-discursive features.

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References

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